

## Inside Vineland's old Progresso plant, now home to a produce packaging factory

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F&S Produce in Vineland, purchased the 585,000 square foot former General Mills Progresso Soup plant in October 2017. After a comprehensive retrofitting project, they moved into their retail vegetable and USDA operations into the facility in November 2018. A new retrofitting project is underway, opening in September 2019, that will house their fruit and apple operations. (Craig Matthews / Staff Photographer)

**VINELAND** — Standing before a giant, whirring machine, two workers quickly placed peppers into small slots, and seconds later, the cores of the vegetables were spit out at the other end.

Underneath white lab coats and hair nets, they wore winter jackets and hats as they worked inside a frigid prep room at the new F&S Produce facility in Vineland.

Most rooms are kept at 38 degrees per USDA rules, and outside the building, evaporators as large as small homes suck in wind and cool it.

"We do a lot every day... Celery, kale, cabbage, peppers, carrots, red tomatoes, onions," said Esau Gramajo, of Bridgeton, listing off the vegetables he handled during his Tuesday shift, which began before the sun rose.

The 585,000 square-foot facility was once home General Mill's Progresso soup canning factory for 75 years, but it shuttered in 2017, leading to the loss of more than 300 jobs.

The closing left Vineland with a major empty building in need of a new tenant, and some New Jersey politicians expressed concern for the future of the city's workforce.

It wasn't long, though, before F&S Produce toured the facility and decided to move in, adding to the two plants it already owned in Rosenhayn.

The produce packaging company secured \$24 million in tax breaks over a ten year period from the state Economic Development Authority after promising to keep 280 jobs and create at least an additional 60 positions.

After the deal was announced, Mayor Anthony Fanucci said the new business was welcome in Vineland, a small city, with a population of 60,000 and an economy that relies on manufacturing jobs.

"It was very important to me, and to the members of City Council, that we fill this location as quickly as possible," Fanucci said. "We are proud to welcome the company and the new jobs they will provide to the community."

Operations at part of the plant began five month ago. There, workers package vegetables into sandwiches and salads, in addition to making dressings and other ingredients.

Those pre-made salads and sandwiches you buy at supermarkets like Acme, Shoprite and Trader Joe's likely come from F&S Produce's plants.

"The change in the plant is indicative of the rise in people wanting fresher foods," said Colin Turner, Chief Strategy Officer for F&S Produce.

Construction is still going on in another 120,000 square foot section of the Vineland building. Crews are retrofitting the former Progresso space, adding drains on the ground and tearing up some old equipment.

When complete in September, 120 employees will work there packaging fruits. There are 60 open positions now, with production and prep workers paid an average of \$13.60 an hour. He said the company has created about 140 new jobs, more than required by the state.

"We're still hiring for about 60 positions," Turner said. "There's an orientation happening right now."

The produce comes from as far as South America, but some is sourced locally when in season: mushrooms from Kennett Square, Pennsylvania and peppers, tomatoes and kale from Cumberland County farms.